

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, studied Spanish as a New Trier High School student.

And that choice has served the 1977 graduate well in communicating with Hispanic constituents, he said.

But if Kirk was in high school today, he'd most likely enroll in Chinese, he told a group of New Trier students at a joint presentation with Consul General Xu Jinzhong on the U.S.-China Engagement Act.

"It will open more doors and make a brighter future for you than almost any other decision in your education," he said, referring to the study of Chinese. "This is a vast new world that is opening, and the 21st century is very much an Asian century, not a European century."

Kirk and Jinzhong came to New Trier -- which pioneered Chinese language offerings at the high school level -- to introduce new legislation that includes an additional \$20 million in federal aid for Chinese language programs for both elementary and high school students.

During their remarks, Kirk and Jinzhong explained to students how both countries can benefit from strong economic and diplomatic relations.

Many of their comments were similar to those presented earlier in the day to local business and academic leaders at a roundtable discussion.

Kirk emphasized that American corporations are making a dent in this country's trade deficit with China, noting that the executives at United Airlines listed "access to China" as all three of their top three concerns.

"It's what's pulling the airline out of bankruptcy," Kirk said, recalling a meeting with executives at the Elk Grove Village based corporation.

And Kirk told the students that Chinese cooperation is essential on the diplomatic front, on issues like Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Jinzhong shared similar remarks, saying good relations "are in the complimentary interests of the two countries but also contribute to the peace and stability of Asia and in the world at large."

He told students that the United States and China established diplomatic relations in 1979 and "there have been up's and down's over the years but bilateral relations have been developing and going forward" since then.

Looking to offset criticism of the trade deficit with China, Jinzhong emphasized that his country is the biggest buyer of American soybeans, wheat and cotton, and that American exports increased by 118 percent from 2001 to 2004.

Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Washington last week was on the minds of both speakers, who related to students that leaders want to heighten cooperation on space exploration and trade-related issues.

Students in the audience queried the speakers about job opportunities for American college students in China -- Jinzhong said there are many -- and also wanted to know how schools would be able to encourage more students in this country to take Chinese.

One student also wanted to know if Chinese students learn Cantonese in addition to the Mandarin, the official dialect taught all over the country.

Many listening were among the approximately 120 New Trier High School students now enrolled in Chinese, while others came to the presentations as part of advanced economics and

other courses.

Michael Mui, a New Trier student who is taking Chinese, said he was interested to learn of the educational and job opportunities for American Chinese-speakers but he wondered "how they'd be able to convince more students to take a risk and take Chinese," rather than studying Spanish or another more familiar language.

Mui noted that Chinese children start learning English at five but many Americans don't take up a language until junior high or high school.

"We don't seem to have the same interest in learning" foreign languages, he said.

Some students who attended the presentation and aren't taking Chinese now said they're thinking of enrolling in college.

Ann Hickey, a senior, said she's studying the United States' trade deficit with China and other economic issues in her Advanced Placement economics class.

But she came away surprised at another deficit -- in the number of Americans learning Chinese.

"It was cool to see that by us taking Chinese, we can build stronger relations, and we need to ramp it up," said Hickey, who has taken Spanish classes at New Trier.